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Soviet Popular Culture in the Gorbachev Era

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What does popular culture reveal about a society? It charts the different ways that people enjoy themselves in their free time in space of their own choosing — home, at friends', on the street, or in places of public relaxation. Its genres and media can uncover deeper values, the "solutions" in life about order, romance, family, deviance, friendship, and work. The reordering of popular culture now occurring in the USSR opens up this assortment of problems and solutions to full scrutiny and free discourse, with sometimes surprising revelations. Recent movements and shifts in reading habits, show attendance, film and television viewing, musical tastes, and non-structured leisure indicate a rapid growth of amateur culture — performance art, music, graphics, and hobbies. These changes also reflect a decentralization of cultural life through the spread of electronic media, especially video players, and an emerging recognition by the authorities of the legitimacy of spontaneously generated culture from below. And they demonstrate an accompanying "system" of alliances, friendships, networks, partnerships, patronage relations, and celebrity interlock that links "stars" of popular culture with the other arts and with influential leaders of Soviet society, journalism, and politics.

Strong currents of iconoclasm, demythologizing, and open irreverence in all genres of popular culture are demonstrated by nude pictures and obscene lyrics in public places and heretofore unseen levels of shock and violence in movies and TV. This has evoked a complicated but very visible and audible countercurrent of resentment, envy, and hostility. The present cultural duel recapitulates many themes of the critique leveled by a moralizing intelligentsia in the 1900s and in the 1920s against popular forms of entertainment, such as boulevard literature, risqué variety shows, jazz, and "trashy" movies. It is also the culmination of recent decades of infighting in repertory committees, censors' offices,

ideological headquarters, and all arenas of entertainment. At the core of the present struggle is the Gorbachev challenge to the spirit of the Brezhnev era, whose culture was recently called one of "vulgar optimism [which] covered everything with a vigorous phrase and a glistening smile."¹

Traditional studies of Soviet culture have overwhelmingly focused on high culture, especially literature. Popular culture may reveal more about society because it is an interlocking system, a vast code of meanings and symbols that migrate from one genre to another and that function in a special way for the majority of Soviet Russian citizens. The best way to get to the values that popular culture bears, represents, and promotes or rejects is to survey it as whole. It is also necessary to approach this subject with an open mind, to discard the notions that only politically dissident culture in Soviet society is legitimate or authentic or popular, that cultural rebels are *ipso facto* politically motivated, and that official, traditional, and old-fashioned tastes are imposed from above and have no following among the people.

The Most Reading Nation on Earth?

Soviet commentators have long claimed that their people are the world's most voracious readers (*samyi chitaiushchii narod*). Now Soviet critics are questioning this with anguished lamentations about the alleged decline of reading habits. This complaint, which has risen in cycles since the late nineteenth century, says that the masses are turning from reading to other forms of relaxation, or that they are reading the wrong things. A typical recent article, by the critic Maria Chegodaeva, juxtaposes "real" art (which is cathartic, cleansing, deeply stirring, and able to evoke tears or laughter) with what the author calls "comforting art" (popular culture and reading matter which are light, easy to consume, and unburdened with big ideas). She likens comforting art to its social setting — the

1 Evgenii Sidorov quoted in Anthony Olcott, "Glasnost' and Soviet Culture," M. Friedberg and H. Isham, eds., *Soviet Society Under Gorbachev* (New York, 1987), 118.



cozy individual apartment which is rapidly replacing the old communal flat and the "homey life" that is as psychologically and culturally "indoors" as it is physically, a life removed from the storms and passions of reality. The author seems to shudder as she cites a recent example — a cartoon history of Russia. Literary critic Nikolai Miroshnichenko wrings his hands over a poll which reports that only 45 percent of adult males read books regularly, a figure that would seem impressively high in many other societies but which reflects a decline in the USSR. Alluding to the present passion for television and popular music among the young, he concludes wistfully that the USSR has become "the most dancing nation." He and many other observers are upset by amateurism and vulgarity in writing and by the fact that the "lesser" genres of books, such as crime and historical novels and science fiction, are crowding out serious literature in readers' preference.²

In terms of book sales and magazine publication, the two most popular writers in recent years are Valentin Pikul and Iulian Semenov. Pikul draws on the Russians' fascination with the upperclass life styles of the tsarist past, an area neglected by Soviet historians.³

Semenov's bestselling thrillers, such as *TASS is Authorized to Announce*⁴ and *Seventeen Moments of Spring*, have been made into enormously popular television series. Western readers of Frederick Forsythe, Tom Clancy, and Robert Ludlum may find it hard to understand Semenov's appeal. It stems from his ability to draw on an internal code of Soviet reading habits, memories, and sensibilities, very cleverly combining the familiar (references to Hemingway and the Spanish Civil War, feminized villains, and learned cops) with titillating elements of the new (exotica, atrocities, light sex, more open social criticism, and knowing allusions to the inner circles of film and entertainment celebrities). Semenov also presents the realia of KGB investigative procedures and technologies which he knows intimately and, like Pikul, writes about the history that Soviet historians have neglected — in this case Nazi Germany.

Science fiction has been an extremely popular genre since its vigorous revival in the late 1950s, following an entire generation of neglect and unofficial banning under Stalin. As with detective fiction, it reflects readers' tastes and curiosity and lifts them out of the everyday world into another time and space. It also provides adventure, suspense, and puzzling situations, and takes standard jabs at capitalism. But unlike the detective genre, science fiction creates scenarios that may seem anti-Western in form but which can be interpreted as critiques of Soviet society and policy. The built-in obsession with the frontiers of science and with rapid technological ad-

vances appeals mightily to its main audience: young urban males, especially those with aspirations for a scientific or technical career. In the 1980s, Soviet science fiction seems to be moving in a trendy, Western-style direction. In the early 1980s appeared the "Aelita" annual award for excellence in science fiction (inspired by Alexei Tolstoy's 1923 novel and analogous to the American "Hugo"). In 1988, a major author, Dmitry Bilenkin, called for Soviet science fiction fan clubs and magazines in emulation of those in advanced, scientifically literate countries. Well-known science fiction writers have come out openly for *glasnost'* and *perestroika*. This summer, one of the most famous of them, Eremai Parnov, lashed out against the "medieval era" of Stalinism, and a subcommittee of the Writers' Union dealing with adventure and entertainment fiction resolved to turn their art to the struggle against "reaction" — in other words against the foes of Gorbachev.⁵

In addition to science fiction, detective novels, and historical potboilers, a proliferation of subgenres is now evident. There is no Soviet "horror" novel as yet, but translations of Stephen King are very popular. And recent critical reactions to Iurii Nikitin's East-West love and sex novel, *Hologram* — with its scenes of resort romance, real flesh in hotel bedrooms, a starry-eyed young American woman visiting the Don, foreign bars, drunken tourists, and a total absence of ideas — indicate that writers have crossed a great divide which might revive old Russian traditions of boulevard novels and perhaps even move on to gothics, candlelight romances, doctor-nurse tales, and other pulp styles that are so massively popular in North America and Western Europe.⁶

Show: Beyond the Bolshoi and the Taganka

When Western travellers think of Soviet theater, names like Kirov, Bolshoi, Taganka, Liubimov, Shatrov, and Tovstonogov come to mind. Yet many millions of Soviet citizens have never been to these places or seen works written or directed by these men. For most Soviets, the stage means local theaters, amateur companies, touring ensembles, the circus, or variety shows of all kinds — known in Russian as *estrada*. Amateur theater has been expanding for years and the atmosphere of *glasnost'* has pushed the movement to full speed. Thousands of self-financed companies — private in almost every way — are springing up all over the USSR. In Moscow, for example, Blackboard, Nikita Gates, Chekhov Street, and Moscow Experimental have joined a syndicate called "Echo," which has a two-year plan to operate on a collective contract based on economic accountability (*khozrazchet*). The variety of formats, styles, and arrangements with authorities is

2 *Sovetskaia kultura* (hereafter as SK), July 30, 1988, 4; Olcott, "Glasnost'," 107.

3 Klaus Mehnert, *The Russians and their Favorite Books* (Stanford, 1983) 32, 50-1, 85, 155-60. Pikul's popularity has not diminished since this book appeared. On historians and Pikul, see Mark von Hagen's discussion in *The Harriman Institute Forum*, I:11 (November 1988).

4 Now available in paperback translation (New York, 1988). Analysis of his works in Walter Laqueur, "Julian Semyonov and the Soviet Political Novel," *Society*, XXIII/5 (July-Aug. 1986), 72-80.

5 Richard Stites, "Vision and Value: World Outlook and Inner Fears in Soviet Science Fiction," in Loren Graham, ed., *The Human Dimension of Science and Technology in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming).

6 Olcott, "Glasnost," 109. See Anatolii Rybakov's indignant review of *Gologramma* in *Literaturnaia gazeta* (hereafter as LG) Sept. 7, 1986, 3.

infinite. The sort of avant-garde performances that the American theater specialist Alma Law witnessed some years ago — plays put on in suburban train cars and in private flats — are now out in the open. A recent performance of *Tree*, a Leningrad experimental group, would have been unthinkable before the onset of the Gorbachev era: near nudity, audience shock, dark references to the Red Army, and so on. It is doubtful that such avant-garde theater will become popular. But those “studio” theater groups who embrace topical themes (rather than the eternal or existential) seem to have a better chance of garnering large audiences. Such themes have included breakdance, disco, and commentary on the Afghanisthan war.⁷

Even the hallowed circus ring is not immune to the winds of change that are blowing over the cultural landscape. Recent press accounts have told of circus tyrants dethroned, of rude treatment of artists by bosses, of improper safety devices and resultant injuries and deaths, and of extreme inequalities of pay. But since *perestroika* also means responsiveness to audiences, and since Soviet audiences love the circus just the way it is — an estimated 100 million Soviets attend each year — it seems unlikely that structural changes will lead to changes in style or artistry.⁸

Russian *estrada* (the word is derived through French from the Spanish word for low stage) includes the entire world of show — variety, cabaret, nightclub, vaudeville, operetta, and popular music concerts — and can be either live or on television. Live *estrada* is next in popularity to television and movies. It involves hundreds of thousands of concerts put on for tens of millions of people each year, placing its attendance figures far ahead of drama, opera, and ballet. A multi-genre show, *estrada* combines music and comic satire.

Soviet standup comedy is virtually unknown outside the country and may sound like an oxymoron. In fact, it is one of the great glories of popular culture in that country. Its roots are in fairground barkers who regaled, amused, and insulted on-lookers from a wooden box in bygone days, in variety and cabaret shows at the turn of the century, in the towns of the Jewish pale, and in the revolutionary satire of the 1920s.⁹ The father of modern Soviet stage comedy was the late Arkady Raikin. Raikin possessed the gift of the ghetto — that peculiarly Jewish approach to humor that combines searing satire with gentle sympathy for our flawed humanity. He walked the edge of official censure for four decades, delivered sharp social commentary, and survived the Stalin and Zhdanov cultural pogroms. His routines, which were lengthy, complex, even learned, were topical and more theatrical than those of American comics, with their chains of one-liners, and certainly less salty than either European cabaret or American

nightclub comedy. He used structure and narrative with a stunning cumulative effect and embellished it with a repertory of gestures and voice registers that kept Soviet audiences roaring with laughter.¹⁰

There are dozens of *estrada* comedians, including Raikin's son Konstantin, a brilliant comic narrator. Another, Mark Olshevsky, speaks of the improvisational quality of comic routines and the importance of a direct, almost physical, rapport with the audience.¹¹ The Soviet comedian must not only amuse and entertain, but also display empathy and an understanding of everyday problems: work, in-laws, dating, corruption, bureaucracy, and especially neighbors (who in the Soviet context are often across the wall, not the hall). Satirical comedy is partly created by its audience and its environment. The laughter connecting the standup comics to their listeners about the shortcomings of Soviet life may be more socially significant than the muted exclamations and breathless silences of the Taganka theater that Western visitors have so often noted.

Estrada comedy is changing in two ways. A movement is on to organize all its artists into a union parallel to that of writers, composers, and filmmakers. Of greater cultural importance is the growing perception among professionals that it is becoming more difficult to produce irony and satire through Aesopian language because the new openness in public discourse cuts at the heart of oblique social satire. This means that comedy may have to become bolder, more vulgar and direct. What this will do to the popularity of *estrada* comedy, which is still immense, is impossible to say.¹²

The Silver Screen

When the superb metaphorical anti-Stalin film *Repentance* appeared in Moscow, Western press reports spoke of massive attendance nightly at Moscow cinemas. But my straw poll of non-intelligentsia workers and employees in Soviet towns in the summer of 1987 indicated overwhelmingly that almost none had seen the film or planned to (and that the one who had did not understand it). Western film scholars have shown that Soviet audiences in the 1920s did not rush to see the masterpieces of Eisenstein and Pudovkin that all intellectual filmgoers adore. The masses went to see Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks; foreign films about cowboys, Tarzan, criminals, and the thief of Baghdad; and Soviet productions that dealt with Western-style adventure, vampire bears, or low comedy.¹³ Soviet movies audiences today, like those the world over, have not changed much since the birth of cinema. They still prefer films of action, adventure, and pure entertainment over allegorical, symbolic, experimental, or philosophical films.

7 *Soviet Life* (Sept. 1986), 52-3; *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 39:11 (1987), 17; *Ogonek*, 2 (Jan. 1987), 32-3; *Soviet Observer* (hereafter as *SO*) (Sept. 29, 1988), 1, 5.

8 *SK* (Nov. 13, 1986), 5.

9 E.M. Kuznetsov, *Iz proshlogo russkoi estrady* (Moscow, 1958); S.S. Klitin, *Estrada* (Leningrad, 1987).

10 E.D. Uvarova, *Arkadii Raikin* (Moscow, 1986); Iu. Dmitriev, *Estrada i tsirk* (Moscow, 1977), 102-6; *Teatr Arkadiya Isaakovicha Raikina* (Videotape, 1987).

11 *SK* (Jan. 20, 1987), 5.

12 *Ibid.* (Dec. 18, 1986), 5; *LG* (March 11, 1987), 8.

13 Richard Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979); Denise Youngblood, *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era* (Ann Arbor, 1985).

The 1986 revolt of Elem Klimov and other directors against the cinematic old guard has been much noted of late. It has effected the release of many previously shelved and censored films and it seems to promise both greater artistic freedom and more attention to the market. This can be achieved, as it was in the 1920s, by financing artistically worthy but poorly attended films with the receipts from popular ones. Critics recognize that audiences do not flock to see Gleb Panfilov's *Theme* (about the personal crises of a writer and a would-be Jewish emigre) or Alexei German's *My Friend Ivan Lapshin* (a grim portrait of provincial life in the early 1930s). Detective movies, film critic R. Sobolev observes, are "the locomotive of the box office." But, he concludes, since most Soviet crime movies are trashy, the industry should allow more well-made foreign films of that genre to be imported. He suggests the James Bond movies, which at least possess irony and wit. Audience survey research reveals that three quarters of the movie-going public are young people who want action, compelling themes, and exciting plots.¹⁴

Movie theater audiences are diminishing in the face of the competition provided by upgraded television shows and televised films and by the rapid growth of video players, both legal and underground. *Rambo*, *The Last Tango in Paris*, and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* are among the favorites of video audiences. *Tootsie* was a smash hit in Soviet movie houses. Filmmakers will have to satisfy the obvious taste among youth for adventure, violence, eroticism, and shocking cinematic treatments of madness. The "first Soviet horror film" (so advertised) was *Mister Designer* (1988), an entertaining piece of gothic art, but far too tame to slake the thirst for shock that seems to be growing.¹⁵

The industry is responding in a variety of ways. One is the widely touted but still rather formless scheme for "new model films" by independent or semi-independent studios. Another is Forum, a cinema cooperative created in the summer of 1988 by Rudolf Fruntov to produce and distribute films. (The film industry was to have moved to self-financing as of January 1, 1989.) The director Mikhail Belikov, who visited the United States last year, has revived a grandiose version of a scheme hatched in the 1930s for a "Soviet Hollywood" in the Crimea (its creator, Boris Shumiatsky, was executed in the purges). Belikov's is called Kinograd or Cinema City, blending elements of Rome, Hollywood, and Disneyland. It calls for a planned city to be located in the Carpathian Mountains as a filmmaking center for the Soviet bloc; a tourist resort with hotels, a zoo, and a huge amusement park; a technical research center including a library, museum, and costume warehouse; and a colony of mockup historical cities to serve the needs of the studios. Kinograd is to be financed through revenues from tourism. A scheme of "Hollywoodization" such as this —

however it might turn out — could not have been aired publicly before the advent of glasnost'.¹⁶

Moviemakers are also tapping into two current trends in Soviet life: the drastic revision of history and the explosion of rock music. For the former, the documentary is in the lead with major productions such as *More Light* and *Risk-2*, which partially restore the historical truth about the Russian Revolution, early Bolshevism, and Stalinism. A half-dozen shorter documentaries shown this summer at a festival in Finland deal with the rehabilitation of artists, architects, and writers silenced or destroyed in the 1930s, or harassed and persecuted in the 1960s and 1970s. The most effective and disturbing documentary on the rock generation is the Latvian film *Is It Easy to be Young?* (1987) by Juris Podnieks. Some specialists believe that the documentary will soon occupy a major place in Soviet cinematography.¹⁷

Feature films pay less attention to history and more to current problems of alienated urban youth, sexual tension, and hooliganism. Rock film scores and rock musicians appear in these more frequently. In *The Burglar* and *Courier* (both 1987), it is a backdrop. But in *Assa* (1988), rock culture is the symbol of a coming era just as a mafia-like boss is emblematic of the corrupt age about to fade away. *Little Vera* (1988) is the most wrenching of these films to date. An unvarnished closeup of working-class life in a provincial city with scenes of dance-halls and disorderly youth, it shows moments of sexual intimacy between a boy and a girl unprecedented on the Soviet screen.

The Blue Screen

Even more important than film is television. "Television has become the pre-eminent medium of mass communication in the Soviet Union," writes Ellen Mickiewicz. "It is the medium that has created the first mass public in Soviet history."¹⁸ This striking statement is buttressed in her recent book by hard data and compelling arguments. She shows that television is accessible to 93 percent of the population, that 150 million people watch TV news daily (80 percent of all adults), and that some 63 percent of workers and intelligentsia (which included the white collar class as a whole) claim this medium as the chief source of both information and moral values. News and stories dealing with the United States exceed in popularity those about the socialist bloc or the Third World. On recent shows, the chief U.S. correspondent presented meticulous demonstrations of American voting machines and of fast-food retailing procedures. In programming, the entertainment sector — already huge — is getting larger, though still proportionately smaller than on U.S. television.

The massive expansion of television popularity has evoked criticism. The Soviet intelligentsia, to a greater extent

14 *LG* (March 11, 1987), 8. The best introduction to recent Soviet film history is Anna Lawton, "Toward a New Openness in Soviet Cinema," in Daniel Goulding, ed., *Post New Wave Cinema in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (Bloomington, 1988) 1-50.

15 *SK* (Nov. 25, 1986), 4; *People* (Apr. 6, 1987), 18-19, 28; *SO* (Sept. 29, 1988), 5.

16 *SK* (July 30, 1988), 7-8; Taylor, "Boris Shumiatsky and the Soviet Cinema in the 1930s," *Historical J. of Film, Radio, and Television*, VI:1 (1986), 43-64.

17 Lawton, "Rewriting History: a New Trend in Documentary Film," *SO* (Sept. 29, 1988), 6.

18 Ellen Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1988), 204.

than the American educated elite, is still somewhat alienated from the general offerings on television. The eminent scholar and standard-bearer of culturally conservative values, Dmitry Likhachev, sees television as a "great force" but one that is littered with bad programs — a wholly familiar complaint in "media" societies. Irina Tolmakova, a high official in the children's book industry, calls it simply "a terrorist and aggressor who tries to oust literature."¹⁹

The line between popular and educational TV is blurred in the Soviet Union: news is viewed by tens of millions and "pop" shows sometimes contain motifs of uplift or politics. But the extremes of each are quite visible. Purely educational programs do not possess mass appeal. As elsewhere, Soviet viewers like to watch adventure films, popular music shows, comedy reviews, and games and youth shows. The game show *Ready, Girls? (Nu-ka, devushki?)*, combines friendly competition in silly tasks, celebrity figures, and a jocular atmosphere. Audiences love it. Sketches of daily life and takeoffs on lazy clerks and officious bureaucrats give the public at home what Soviet viewers have long sought for in live *estrada*. Audience preference for light entertainment is not new, and the political excitement of *glasnost* does not seem to have diminished it.

However, new things are going on. The old morning exercise program has become an aerobics show of chic females gyrating to rock music in the background. Rock is used to open news and commentary shows and something like music video can be seen on Soviet television. Most dramatic and most representative of the Gorbachev era is the dynamic interview and call-in show on topical issues. Mickiewicz calls one of these, *The Twelfth Floor*, "the most interesting program on Soviet television" and "probably the most popular."²⁰ In it, the visual medium clearly out-dramatizes the press in treating rock culture, drug abuse, prostitution, Afghan veterans, youth disaffection, violence, and corruption with unprecedented candor and energy. On this and similar shows in recent months could be seen young Soviet neo-Nazis expounding racist opinions, body builders explaining why they beat up punks, and rockers telling why they do not belong to ordinary society. They pick up the public anger and the sharp clashes of opinion among their interviewees and respond to it with sympathy and a desire to defuse tensions and solve problems.

Television is *the* mass medium today in the Soviet Union, and *glasnost* is its guiding principle. Real news, politics, social candor, and popular entertainment of a new order are its content. The study of television reveals two important developments that are crucial to the understanding of its relationship to other realms of popular culture. First it has already caused a reduction in the public's consumption of reading matter, theater, shows of all kinds, concerts, and cinema-viewed movies. All of these have registered fall-offs. Mickiewicz claims that all other previous uses of leisure time,

including visits to friends, have decreased. Second, the new principle of news in the Gorbachev era is *operativnost* (timeliness), an effort to authenticate and enliven the new openness by giving viewers what they want to know immediately and by concretizing the world and its unfolding events. This seems to be a direct response to Mikhail Gorbachev's remarks at the XXVII Party Congress on the dullness of the media and the need to infuse them with life and respond to actual audience preferences.

Television news and entertainment mutually frame and define one another. Frankness and timeliness in news coverage and analysis is paralleled by the sharpening of the themes of popular culture as a whole. Live popular genres are not disappearing, but much of their production is being transferred to television. The paradoxical result is that while some standardization is required in order to present most genres to the mass public on the blue screen, timeliness and openness in their performance make the innovations in popular culture accessible to almost everybody in the Soviet Union simultaneously. These include historical revisionism, strident social commentary, iconoclastic styles of dress and speech, and audacious criticism of authority.

Leisure Culture

Scholars sometimes exaggerate the importance of high culture over low, of one genre over others, of all cultural production over unstructured leisure activity. One of the most perceptive observers of Soviet life, John Bushnell,²¹ has shown that leisure culture has been surprisingly autonomous and stable in this century. Its main ingredients have been visiting (or entertaining) friends and going out (*progulki*). The latter term can mean street promenade, but more often denotes simply being with companions outside the home, workplace, or school. People can be at cafés, bars, restaurants, or "hang-outs" such as street corners, parks, and hotel entrances. There they talk, tell jokes, flirt, neck, play cards, dance, or generally have fun. Urban Russians visit or hang out not because of poor housing or because of the shortage of alternative cultural opportunities. Rather they do so by choice, something that some Kremlinologists believe the Soviet people have never possessed.

The restaurant is the major locus of urban leisure in Soviet towns, especially for those eighteen or over. Bars, clubs, and cafés are small and few in number, though new ones are springing up all the time. Even restaurants are hard to get into because service people and managers dislike crowds and the prospect of overwork, and because their food supplies are sometimes depleted by the employees themselves. But the attractions of restaurants are manifold: the bright, noisy hall (often called a "stable" by their denizens), the conviviality of the table, a talkfest, appetizers and vodka (after 2:00 P.M.),

19 *Ogonek* (Aug. 1985), 22. See also *SK* (July 18, 1988), 8. Kristian Gerner, "Soviet Television Viewing in Sweden" (ms.).

20 Mickiewicz, *Split Signals*, 177-8; Jonathan Sanders, "A Very Mass Media: Soviet Television," *Television Quarterly*, xxii:3 (1986), 7-27; Nick Hayes, "Glasnost and the Politics of Soviet Media" (ms.).

21 "Urban Leisure Culture in Post-Stalin Russia" in T. Thompson and R. Sheldon, eds., *Soviet Society and Culture: Essays in Honor of Vera S. Dunham* (Boulder, 1988), 58-86.

live music, and — because Russians have retained the European custom of combining dancing with dining — a room full of dancing partners. Soviet dance floors revel in energy, eclecticism, and in the generational mix that has all but disappeared in societies where popular culture is strictly stratified by age or style and where dancing has been largely separated from dining. Soft rock bands are displacing the old pop and swing combos but the range is still very wide — from the upscale kitsch *estrada* of Moscow's Starry Skies Restaurant to the blaring saxes and brass of the Metropol in Leningrad.

People in the USSR do all kinds of things in their spare time from familiar hobbies such as sports (a vast activity deserving of a special study), chess, book hunting and icon-collecting to the lesser known ones of pet care, motorcycle hockey, and collecting pins, records, and Beatles' memorabilia. In big towns the *fartsovshchiki* or dealers seem to derive psychic joy from the time and energy they spend on buying and selling on the black market. Less shady, but still shadowy, is the tremendous activity involved in organizing underground shows, concerts, and garage rock, assembling high-tech paraphernalia (speakers, video players), and participating in a *tusovka* or happening. Fashion, makeup, hairstyle, and perfume have occupied urban women at least since the 1930s, a part of the *embourgeoisement* that overtook Soviet society from that time. In the era of Gorbachev, this has been given a sharp boost by the emerging image of Raisa Gorbacheva, by the ascendance of fashion designer Slava Zaitsev into global prominence, and by the staging of the first Miss Moscow contest (soon to be the subject of a scathing Soviet documentary).²²

For urban Soviet youth, many of the above activities interlace with their persistent habit of hanging out together in groups or gangs that share the same taste — groups of constantly changing shape and composition. In the past few years, a new street culture has arisen that is popular in two senses: it is the chosen leisure form of those in it; and, because of its expressive nature, it is an object of entertainment for the general public. On Moscow's Arbat Street and at the Bitsevsky and Izmailovo parks, one sees not only daring new outdoor art shows, but a whole marketplace of cultural forms — breakdance (which flourished from about 1984 to 1986), rock bands, singers, poets, youngsters in bizarre costumes, trinket sellers. It is the same array of elements which twenty years ago linked the hippie hangouts of a score of American and European cities into a single culture.²³

Rock and Roll Is Here to Stay

The driving force behind much of the urban youth culture of large Soviet cities is rock music. The Soviet establishment has long tried to exert some control over the production of

popular music by promoting "mass songs" of patriotism, revolutionary optimism and sentiment, and by allowing the resurrection of old forms such as Gypsy, urban, and folk music, as well as pop styles from Europe. The old forms and the foreign imports are still immensely popular, at least among people over thirty. For decades, the contending alternative to these was jazz, whose struggle for official acceptance lasted until the sixties. No sooner was it accepted that the popularity of jazz declined, partly under the impact of emerging rock music. Like jazz, rock had to fight the same battle for two decades. By the late Brezhnev years it was almost fully accepted and had become the most popular type of music among young Soviets.²⁴

There was a time when scholars who looked at popular music at all saw it only in jazz or in the great guitar poets or bards, Bulat Okudzhava, Aleksandr Galich, and Vladimir Vysotskii. This tradition is by no means dead (though two of the above singers are) and a new star has arisen to carry it on: Aleksandr Rozenbaum. Furthermore, the cult of Vysotskii (who died in 1980) is still very much alive and broader in social scope than the cult of rock. Nevertheless, rock is in the ascendant. The much revered Boris Grebenshchikov of Aquarium has become almost a cult figure for Soviet urban youth. There is a very strongly perceived spiritual element in Grebenshchikov and Vysotskii before him that distinguishes them sharply from their Western counterparts, though this is not the only reason for their popularity.

Under Gorbachev, formerly proscribed rock bands were recognized and now all styles of rock are blossoming — hard, soft, punk, art, folk, fusion, retro, and heavy metal. Some estimate the number of registered rock groups at 250,000. While the music of Soviet rock closely resembles that of the West right down to instrumentation and electronic gear, Russian players have ceased singing it to English words and are developing a Russian lyrical style. Professional rockers belong to one of about 200 concert agencies and they perform in clubs, restaurants, concert halls, radio shows, television programs, recording studios, and films. They are paid according to the assessments of official agencies on the basis of appeal, skill, training, and content of lyrics. Amateurs get no state bookings or pay but are free to drift from gig to gig, to shape their own programs, and to make informal wage deals. Beyond the pros and paid amateurs are the genuine amateurs, a whole world of garage bands, barracks groups, and workplace ensembles who play for themselves and friends. Rock clubs and laboratories offer a further variant in employment and performance opportunity. The net result is that a great deal of rock performance is unmonitored.

Soviet rock, like jazz before it, has many well-placed friends and allies. The popularity of such groups as AVIA, Black Coffee, Aquarium, Time Machine, Stas Namin, Bravo,

22 *Washington Post* (hereafter as *WP*), Sept. 8, 1988, C8 (motorcycle hockey) and Apr. 6, 1988, C1, C5 (Miss Moscow). On fashion, see *People* (Apr. 6, 1987), 31, 133-5; *SK* (Nov. 29, 1986), 8; and *Ogonek*, 10 (March 1987), 7.

23 *Ogonek*, 12 (March, 1987), 18-21; Nancy Condee and Vladimir Padunov, "The Frontiers of Soviet Culture: Reaching its Limits?", *The Harriman Institute Forum*, 1:5 (May, 1988), 2.

24 S.F. Starr, *Red and Hot: the Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1983); Artemy Troitsky, *Back in the USSR: the True Story of Rock in Russia* (London, 1987). See also Paul Godfrey, "The Leningrad Rock Community," in J. Riordan, ed., *Soviet Youth Problems* (Bloomington, forthcoming).

Pop Mekhanika, Kino, Arsenal, and Avtograf has brought them celebrity and contacts with other figures in the art and entertainment worlds. A well-known composer of Soviet pop (singable and danceable, but neither jazz nor rock), Raimond Pauls, promotes an open market-place for all kinds of music. Alla Pugacheva, the superstar of Soviet pop, has actively supported rock musicians. Andrei Voznesenskii, viewed by many as the leading Soviet poet, is an enthusiastic promoter of Grebenshchikov, whose group was once outlawed. Rock operas, such as *Juno and Avos* (1981), with lyrics by Voznesenskii, have endowed rock with respectability for some people, as have decorous rock concerts, festivals, and interviews on television. Rock has invaded film, both documentary and feature. Critic Oleg Panov calls rock music the folklore of the Scientific Technical Revolution and urges the public to take it seriously, admit its vast popularity, and criticize it intelligently.²⁵

But rock has also made enemies because of its style and its social overflow. The loudness and the harsh vocal phrasing assault the ears of older people, including those in power, who for decades have tuned in to smoother pop music, imported or Soviet. Rock lyrics such as “get out of control” or “my father is a fascist” are offensive to devotees of Leninism and to those who recall the war against “fascism” in 1941. A rock lament on the lack of places for couples to make love ends like this:

*In summer we can go together to the woods
But it takes an hour to get there
And if the local yobs [fuckers] get you
You risk being beaten into a pile of shit.*

Or the boast of a corrupt bureaucrat:

*I am a man of the people
The people chose me
And raised me over the years.
That's how it is, boom, boom, fuck you;
That's how it is.*

Song titles such as “Atheist Twist” or names of groups such as Pig or Mister Twister (from the name of a universally known children’s verse) can be offensive to an older generation. Drugs, alcoholism, corruption, and urban nihilism — the stuff of everyday *glasnost* — are ideal materials for the sharpened tongues of rock singers. Rock players have fainted into the audience and shepherded livestock onto the stage. On the visual front, hairstyles and costumes range from the hippie look of the 1960s to mocking replicas of Russian civil war uniforms.

If, as *estrada* comics claim, verbal satire is now losing its punch, rockers are filling the void with satire of sound, sight, and gesture. Like the popular music of other eras and places, rock has produced a subculture that is carried onto the streets: a lexicon, facial expressions, gestures, clothes — a code and

ethos shared by its members and serving to define its identity. Heavy metal fans call themselves *metallisty*, a term associated by older people with the steelworkers of the October Revolution. As a recent study of the inner life of the Leningrad rock counterculture shows, the Soviet rock generation, like the Russian nihilists of the 1860s or like the American hippies of the 1960s, have raised a personal and cultural revolt and not one that is engaged in political dissidence.²⁶

Of all the manifestations of popular culture in the Gorbachev era, rock is seen as the most negative by its enemies. Some of these are musical competitors. Pop composers are distressed by rock singers who write their own songs — and collect their own royalties. Traditional crooners, such as Iosif Kobzon and Muslim Magomaeve, are not only losing ground to rock singers but are sometimes even mocked by them. Jazz and big band figures, who fought for years in order to gain recognition, state publicly that rock is not music at all. A poignant and typical example is Konstantin Orbelian. This smoothly attired leader of the Armenian State Estrada Orchestra, with its big band sound, is a child of the Stalinist purges who fought against all odds to make it to the top of popular music only to find that nowadays his kind of music is ignored by “near-sighted managers” and television producers. Zhanna Bichevskaiia, a very popular folk-revival singer, complains that children now “listen to non-descript music.”²⁷

Of greater social and political import is the opposition to rock, or certain forms of it, by cultural conservatives who cover a wide range of the political spectrum. Elements of the press have called rock “musical alcoholism” and a “creature of the the C.I.A.” In 1987 a Red Army officer identified heavy metal with Zionism and the once powerful writer Sergei Mikhailov linked rock bands to AIDS, prostitution, drugs, crime, and finally treason. The rightwing group *Pamiat'* puts the matter simply: “Rock groups are satanism.” Yegor Ligachev, the recently downgraded Politburo “conservative,” opposes the “spread of primitive music” and urges a return to folk and classical music. A group of influential ruralist writers claim that rock is “mentally and morally damaging.” Aleksandr Iakovlev, a main force in the Gorbachev reform movement, on viewing American rock on television, said that “such things we shall never accept.” Dmitry Likhachev sees popular music of the present moment as all “wild rhythms and stupid words.”²⁸

Is this merely a verbal war or does the anti-rock current possess a social base? Informal youth groups and gangs have been around for a long time but have become more diverse and more publicized in the last few years. They include Afghanistan war veterans (*afgantsy*), vigilantes who visit mob justice on speculators and grafters, bikers, sports fan gangs (*fanaty*), body-building cultists, neo-Nazis (*fashisty*), and a whole array of street gangs distinct from and usually hostile to punks, hippies, and rockers. Juvenile violence and vandalism among

25 SK (Nov. 16, 1986), 3-4 and (Jan. 10, 1987), 4; *Ogonek*, 11 (March, 1987).

26 Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, passim. Godfrey, “Leningrad Rock Community” (lyrics).

27 Troitsky, *Back*, 99; *Pevtsy sovetskoi estrady* (Moscow, 1985); SK (July 20, 1988), 5; *Ogonek*, 49 (Dec. 1986), 17.

28 Troitsky, *Back in the USSR*, 125, 131; Pedro Ramet and Sergei Zamascikov, “The Soviet Rock Scene,” *Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies Occasional Paper*, No. 223, 10-11; WP (Feb. 18, 1988); (Nov. 27, 1987); (Apr. 20, 1988); *Ogonek*, 31 (Aug. 1985).

working-class and vocational school youth in provincial industrial towns and ports and in the proletarian suburbs of big cities has been much in the news lately. Some of it is fueled by resentment of the privileged youth of Moscow and Leningrad (called *goldeny* by one television interviewee). The best known of these gangs is the Lyubery, named from the Moscow district of Lyubertsy. Bodybuilding — very popular now on Soviet media — is their main hobby, and they have adopted special clothing, names, rituals, and a way of walking. Moved by a kind of angry redneck patriotism, the Lyubery identify rock music, its cultural style, and its devotees with the West, and ultimately with disloyalty. They have travelled to downtown Moscow to beat up rockers and hippies, cut their hair, and smash their artifacts. Victims and foes of the Lyubery perceive a natural (and perhaps active) alliance between the culturally conservative intelligentsia and the street gangs.²⁹

Gorbachev, *Glasnost*, and Popular Culture

Mikhail Gorbachev has sent two strong signals about how *glasnost* relates to popular culture: his comment on the need for more responsive media and his 1987 remark at a Central Committee meeting about the need for greater trust in young people. Media echoes have tied this to the upsurge of rock culture: newspapers encourage giving the music a hearing, and television interviewers let the rockers speak for themselves. There is at least a tentative alliance among reform leaders, media managers, a segment of the intelligentsia, and the huge rock community. At the same time, the authorities, the Kom-somol, and entertainment industry leaders are trying to tame and co-opt rock music culture, to deflect it from nihilistic directions without eliminating its vigor — a difficult task. The operating principle seems to be that it is politically safer to allow openness in popular culture than not to. Such a policy risks offending the cultural conservatives, but that is the nature of politics.

Many of the changes in popular culture noted here had beginnings in the pre-Gorbachev era. But a new function in the present era is to disseminate in popular and digestible forms the muckraking and revisionism of journalism. In the past, fun and social criticism (tightly constrained) were further apart. Now the two are often combined and they illustrate for the masses both past realities and present problems. This disturbs some as much as it delights others. But much of eccentric popular culture can be defused and legitimized by its very appearance on television in a respectable setting. The whole process is replete with backlash, gaps, and contradictions. It is harder to remain patient in time of ferment than in time of stagnation.

The potential results (the realities are as yet unmeasured) of the thaw in popular entertainment are twofold. First, it can give those who favor reform a greater sense of participation in national renewal by seeing problems dramatized or fictionalized in song, story, television drama, or comedy routine. The audience thrill of identification supplements what people get from news and political language. Secondly, the diverse content of the emerging popular culture reinforces pluralism — existing or in embryo. Religious freedom, greater privacy, personal security and autonomy, preservation of past culture, and conservation of nature are not only promised in speeches, but celebrated in the popular arts. All of this raises hope for the emergence of greater civic consciousness among the Soviet people, a prerequisite for any passage to the long-awaited civil society.

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